

General mental health and new media literacy among Malaysian adult urbanites

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the multifaceted interplay of risk and protective factors influencing general mental health (GMH), focusing on the impact of external validation seeking through online interactions and the protective role of perceived social support (PSS) against GMH problems, mediated by unconditional self-acceptance (USA) and PSS with new media literacy (NML) is introduced as a moderator variable, affecting the interplay between PSS, USA, and interpersonal mattering (IPM) in predicting GMH. A moderated serial mediation model was proposed and tested with 380 purposively recruited adult urbanites from Malaysia. The results reveal that individuals with high NML perceive greater social support, leading to higher self-acceptance and mattering, enhanced GMH protection. This study highlights the critical role of NML in the digital age's impact on GMH.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the midst of the digital era, everyone is confronted with unprecedented challenges to their general mental health (GMH). The year 2020 ushered in a global pandemic, altering lives, and routines, which was then compounded by subsequent socio-political events, including the prolonged compulsory lockdown, which has led us to rely more on the online communication for interpersonal relationship and social feedback [1]. Studies conducted during this period [2]–[6] revealed a significant rise in mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation, as individuals grappled with a shifting societal landscape. Amid these challenges, it has become increasingly crucial to understand both the risk and protective factors that influence GMH. Recent studies [7]–[10] highlights a multifaceted interplay of these factors.

Our recent works in Malaysian setting indicated the detrimental effects of external validation seeking and societal pressures, leading to decreased self-acceptance and sense of mattering, followed by the compromised mental health [11]–[13]. In particular, the need for validation through irresponsible and ignorant habit of social media interactions have been linked to increased feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, depression, and other GMH issues [14]–[16]. The online validation seeking has been haunting the internet users since the time of COVID-19 outbreak until recently, and it gets riskier for their GMH when they are not capable in using the information online media wisely [17]. In other words, the craving of external identity increased simultaneously with the increased tendency of social comparison among the internet users, as well as the accessibility to the global information. In turn, when the social feedback or the online media content is

not perceived as in line with one's expectation, they would likely to develop fear of missing out the chance to be validated, which also followed by the risk of reduced mental wellbeing [18].

- Socio-cognitive protective factor of unconditional self-acceptance (USA)

USA emerges as a protective factor of GMH. Recent studies in various contexts suggested that individuals who possess high levels of USA tend to exhibit greater emotional resilience and psychological well-being, even in the face of external stressors [12], [19], [20]. In other words, individuals would less likely to be at risk of anxiety, depression, or any other GMH issues when they are able to accept themselves unconditionally. As the aforementioned studies have established that USA holds significant protective role on GMH, knowing how USA is developed is an important quest. Because studies have been reported the increase of GMH issues among students [2], [21], [22] it is important for the education stakeholders to consider the development of USA in the curriculum or their non-curricular activities. USA is contingent upon the sense of interpersonal mattering (IPM), the sense that we matter. this relationship can be understood through the lens of self-determination theory (SDT) [23], a relevant theoretical framework for explaining how basic psychological needs influence human motivation and well-being. It posits that individuals have three basic psychological needs: autonomy (the need to feel in control of one's actions), competence (the need to feel capable and effective), and relatedness (the need to feel connected and significant within social contexts). When these basic needs are satisfied, individuals are more likely to experience higher levels of well-being and motivation [23]. In the context of the protective role of USA on GMH, the fulfillment of (IPM). IPM reflects the extent to which individuals feel valued within their social networks, and it acts as a mediator that strengthens the relationship between USA and GMH.

- Perceived social support (PSS) as the focal predictor

Nowadays, PSS is often intertwined with the digital landscape. People seek and receive social support through online interactions and it significantly affects their mental well-being [24]. individuals who effectively navigate the vast expanse of online information, demonstrating a keen ability to discern the quality and relevance of digital content, are more likely to obtain adequate PSS. In this context, PSS represents the emotional and informational support garnered from their social network. Accordingly, a study by Huang *et al.* [20] reveals that PSS is a significant predictor of USA. Individuals who draw upon the support and information they gain through their digital interactions tend to exhibit higher levels of self-acceptance. Therefore, it is evident that the acquisition of PSS through adept online navigation forms a critical backdrop to the positive relationship between USA and PSS, through IPM. In other words, the impact of this perceived support can vary widely based on an individual's ability to navigate the digital world effectively. Individuals with lack of critical thinking ability might misunderstand supportive media content as offensive or 'toxic' and become unable to accept themselves unconditionally [25], believe that they do not matter to others, and fall even deeper to GMH issues [19]. The aforementioned paragraph explained that despite being reported that PSS predicts GMH through USA and IPM, it might interact with the individuals' ability to critically analyze, evaluate, and effectively engage with digital media and information in a technologically driven and interconnected world. This moderator variable is called new media literacy (NML).

- New media literacy (NML) as the moderator

New media itself represents a dynamic and transformative realm of communication that has emerged in the digital age, reshaping the way individuals interact with information and engage in communication. Unlike traditional media, new media or also refers to Web 2.0, leverages digital technologies and the internet to facilitate instant, interactive, and user-generated content. Examples of new media, encompass a wide spectrum, including social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, where users create and share content with global audiences. Blogs and podcasts provide individuals with a platform to express their opinions and expertise. Online news websites and multimedia platforms offer real-time information dissemination. Video-sharing platforms such as YouTube have revolutionized how we access and create video content. In sum, new media transcends traditional boundaries, enabling diverse and democratized informational content creation and consumption, with profound implications for communication, culture, and society. Being literate in new media, or having an adequate NML involves possessing the capacity to critically analyze and evaluate information encountered in various digital formats, including text, images, audio, and video. Drawing from social cognitive theory by Bandura [26], NML is rooted in the idea that individuals can learn to understand and utilize digital media by observing, imitating, and practicing these skills, ultimately enhancing their ability to interact, communicate, and make informed decisions in the digital world. In some studies, individuals with adequate NML are pictured as being critical, skeptical, and digitally adept [27], [28], not making a pre-determined decision to accept or reject online information, whether from their immediate social network or the broader society; they do not passively absorb social feedback without subjecting it to critical scrutiny [29]. On the other hand, individuals with inadequate levels of NML would likely to be less critical in consuming and applying the information they obtain from online media or online communication among themselves [30]; this situation have led many

individuals with lower NML to experience health anxiety during the COVID-19 outbreak as they failed to critically navigate themselves through the online media informational content and develop false belief about the pandemic [31].

The aforementioned studies brought us to the following hypothetical moderated serial mediation model as shown in Figure 1; as the focal variable PSS was obtained from the information from the social feedback and online media contents, and it forms the way individuals assess themselves. This assessment then determines whether they can accept themselves unconditionally. When the individuals can accept themselves as is, they would likely to believe that they matter to the individuals around them. The interplay among these factors then contribute to protect GMH. The presence of an adequate NML is highly important, because inadequately NML might lead to negative PSS, inability to accept oneself unconditionally, and feel that one is not meaningful to others. In turns, this might negatively affect the GMH.

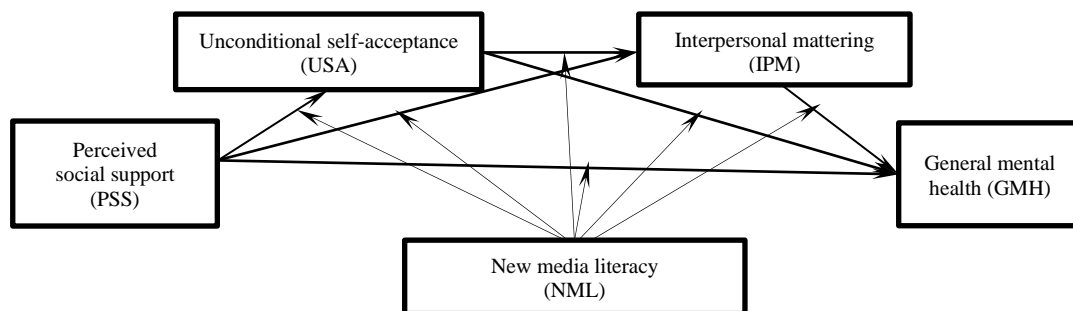


Figure 1. The hypothetical moderated serial mediation model

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants

In this cross-sectional study, 380 participants were recruited from the urban area in Malaysia. As a purposive sampling, the inclusion criteria of the participants are namely i) 18 years of age and above; ii) actively use internet for the purposes of social media, study, work, entertainment, purchases, and business; iii) reside in Malaysia; and iv) are not diagnosed with any GMH problem. The demographic factors, such as their countries, nationalities, genders, and ethnicities were not considered relevant to be included in the analysis as the moderator variable of “new media literacy” is considered the only relevant determinant among our participants to avoid the intrusion of other factors. Our participants were recruited through social media and snowball sampling from our social network, either online or offline. The participation in this study is voluntarily and with the consent from the participants. All the scales, including the informed consent form and demographic questionnaire, were converted to the format of online form to make data collection process more practical.

2.2. Measure

The predictor variable, PSS was measured by the multi-dimension scale of PSS (MSPSS) a 12-item questionnaire that identifies an individual’s perceived level of social support with family, friends, and significant others. Each item is scored on a scale from 1 to 7 [32]. The first mediator variable, USA, was measured by utilizing the unconditional self-acceptance questionnaire (USAQ) by Chamberlain and Haaga in the early 2000s [33], it consists of 20 statements intended to reflect the various aspects of the USA philosophy and practice as distilled from the rational-emotive behavior therapy literature. Participants respond to each item on a scale ranging from 1 (Almost always untrue) to 7 (Almost always true) depending on their perceptions of how characteristic the statement is of them.

The second mediator, the IPM is measured by using the general mattering scale, a brief five-item self-report scale developed by Marcus and Rosenberg in 1987 [34] to assess mattering at an overall level. The scale includes items regarding attention, importance, dependence, being missed, and interest, with scores ranging from 5 to 20; higher scores indicate higher perceptions of mattering. The outcome variable, GMH was measured by using the health questionnaire (GHQ) [35] a self-report questionnaire to assess the levels of psychological distress or mental health problems. It consists of 28 items that are designed to measure four dimensions of mental health namely; i) somatic symptoms, ii) anxiety and insomnia, iii) social dysfunction, and iv) severe depression. It is a widely used screening tool in both research and clinical settings. It is often used to identify individuals who may be at risk for developing mental health problems, as well as to monitor changes in mental health over time. The items are rated on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from “better than usual” to “much worse than usual.” Higher scores on the GHQ indicate higher levels of psychological

distress or GMH problems. Finally, the moderator variable, NML is measured by using new media literacy scale (NMLS) developed by Koc and Barut in 2016 [36], the NMLS measures four components of NML: functional consumption, critical consumption, functional prosumption, and critical prosumption.

2.3. Data collection

The participants were recruited through our social media accounts and other accounts that were opened with specific intention to recruit participants. They retrieved the link to the inform consent, demographic questionnaire, and the scale to measure the rest of the variables. They reported that it took them 20-25 minutes to complete the entire questionnaire set. The demographic questionnaire includes items that work to keep the inclusion criteria complied well, such as the questions of age, living location, and whether they have active social media accounts and actively using internet connection in their daily life.

2.4. Data analysis

The moderated mediation model was tested by Bootstrap method with 5,000 resampling at 95% confidence interval with PROCESS Macro model 92 for SPSS. Bootstrap method was chosen as it is considered a robust method even for non-normally distributed or small-sized data, and therefore diminishes the requirements for assumption tests of homoscedasticity and multicollinearity [37]. It resamples the data to estimate the conditional indirect effects (the mediation effect) across different levels of the moderator (Acceptance and trust towards CGPT). They do this by repeatedly drawing random samples with replacement from their dataset, recalculating the mediation effect for each sample, and assessing how it changes as the moderator varies. This process generates a distribution of conditional indirect effects, allowing for the examination of whether the moderation effect is statistically significant. Bootstrap analysis provides more robust and reliable estimates of mediated and moderated mediation effects when assumptions such as normality are not met. It also helps researchers understand how the mediation effect may vary under different conditions, making it a valuable tool in complex statistical modeling.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

The bootstrap analysis was performed by using PROCESS Macro model 92 for moderated serial mediation as our reviews of literature justified that our hypothetical model consists of one predictor, one outcome, three mediators that are connected in serial manner, and one moderator that interacts with our predictor and all the mediators. The results of the bootstrap analysis are summarized and depicted in Table 1, where the values from each path are reported. Table 1 suggested that in the condition of low NML, USA and IPM did not perform a significant serial mediation on the contribution of PSS on GMH as there was a zero value between the upper and lower boot confidence interval. Similarly, PSS did not significantly predict GMH at the same level of NML; the same phenomenon occurred at the moderate level of NML. On the other hand, when the level of NML is high, USA and IPM can significantly explain the link between PSS and GMH, and the direct link between PSS and GMH was also significant; nevertheless, the direct effect of PSS on GMH was stronger (at $\beta=0.10$) than the indirect effect (from PSS to GMH through USA through IPM, at $\beta=0.018$). It can be concisely interpreted as individuals with high levels of NML who perceive that they are socially supported would be able to accept themselves as they are, feel that they matter to their significant others, and eventually have their overall mental health well protected. Conversely, PSS, either mediated by the two mediators or not, did not significantly predict GMH. Therefore, it can be generally summarized that individuals with high NML would have their GMH protected better by their PSS through their USA and IPM.

Table 1. The summarized results of the bootstrap moderated serial mediation analysis

NML	X→M1	M1→M2	M2→Y	X→M1→Y	X→M2→Y	X→M1→M2→Y	BootLLCI	BootULCI	Dir X→Y	Total X→Y
lo	0.2	0.15	0.1	0.003	0.002	0.003	-0.002	0.008	0.05	0.053
me	0.20	0.15	0.10	0.003	0.002	0.003	-0.002	0.008	0.05	0.053
hi	0.35*	0.25*	0.20*	0.009*	0.007*	0.018*	0.010	0.026	0.10*	0.118*

(* = significant at $p < 0.05$)

3.2. Discussion

This study contributes to the expanding literature on GMH by investigating the roles of PSS, USA, IPM, and NML in the digital era. Our findings reveal that high levels of NML significantly enhance the impact of PSS on GMH through USA and IPM, suggesting that individuals with high NML are better equipped to utilize their social support in ways that foster self-acceptance and a sense of mattering, which in

turn, protects their mental health. This aligns with studies [1]–[6] indicating an increase in mental health issues during significant social disruptions, underscoring the importance of digital literacy in navigating the complex relationship between social support and mental health. However, our results contrast with those studies [2], [21], [22] highlighting the pervasive mental health challenges among students, suggesting that the protective mechanisms of USA and IPM may be less effective in populations with lower NML. Our research builds on the theoretical underpinnings provided by SDT [23], highlighting the crucial role of basic psychological needs in mental health, and extends it by integrating the concept of NML as a moderator in the relationship between social support and mental health.

The relationship between PSS and GMH, moderated by NML, echoes the findings of Huang *et al.* [20], but our study offers a nuanced understanding of how digital literacy shapes the effectiveness of social support. Unlike previous studies [17], [18] that broadly addressed the challenges of online communication, our research specifies the critical role of NML in interpreting and benefiting from digital interactions. Moreover, our study diverges from the literature [14]–[16] by illustrating that the detrimental effects of social media on mental health can be mitigated by high NML, thus highlighting the importance of developing digital literacy skills to combat the adverse impacts of online validation seeking.

3.3. Implications

The practical implications of our findings are manifold. For education stakeholders, incorporating NML into curricula could enhance students' ability to critically engage with digital media, potentially mitigating the negative effects of poor online interactions on mental health. This approach aligns with recommendations from past studies [2], [21], [22], suggesting the need for interventions that bolster psychological resilience among students. Theoretically, our research underscores the importance of considering digital literacy as a crucial factor in the dynamics of social support and mental health, expanding on the frameworks provided by SDT [23] and social cognitive theory [26]. By highlighting NML as a moderating factor, our study suggests that the development of digital literacy skills is essential for leveraging social support as a protective factor against mental health issues. Therefore, it is strongly suggested that educational stakeholders, both government or private-based, to encourage the development of NML skills to the general public.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our study demonstrates that new media literacy significantly moderates the relationship between PSS and GMH, with a high level of NML enabling individuals to more effectively utilize their social support networks to foster USA and a sense of IPM. These findings not only contribute to our understanding of the protective factors in mental health but also highlight the critical role of digital literacy in the current digital age. By developing and promoting NML, individuals can better navigate the complexities of online interactions and social support, ultimately enhancing their mental well-being. Our research offers a comprehensive model that integrates NML with established psychological constructs, providing a robust framework for future studies and interventions aimed at safeguarding mental health in the digital era.

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